

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN

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a **NEW** short story by

JACK RITCHIE

Bradley, not one of the most successful detectives in the world, had struck gold—but he reminded himself he must not get greedy and possibly kill the golden goose . . .

THE GOLDEN GOOSE

by **JACK RITCHIE**

The only contact I ever had with my client was by phone. "Bradley Investigations, *Incorporated*?" he asked, emphasizing the Incorporated.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm calling from San Francisco."

San Francisco is approximately 2,000 miles from my office, as the crow flies.

He introduced himself. "My name is Jameson. James Jameson. I am an attorney representing Mr. Willard MacGregor, of MacGregor Shipping."

"Ah, yes," I said brightly, since he obviously expected me to have heard of MacGregor Shipping before.

He came to the point. "I want you to find a Mrs. Elizabeth Sterling and her son, Harold. Both of them were last known to reside in your area. I got hold of a telephone book for your city and picked your firm out of the yellow pages more or less at random. I know nothing about detective agencies.

"Mr. MacGregor is a man now well along in years and he has come to that point in his life when he is willing to forgive and forget. That is why he wants to find her and her son. And any other progeny she may have accumulated in the passing years."

"What does he want to forgive and forget?"

© 1982 by Jack Ritchie.

"The fact that she married Franklin Sterling. Elizabeth Sterling, nee MacGregor, was Mr. MacGregor's niece. Mr. MacGregor thought that she married much beneath her. Sterling was only a bookkeeper, and a low level one at that, in Mr. MacGregor's firm. How the two of them ever met socially is a mystery. However, they did—and when she married him, Mr. MacGregor banished her from his life—also from his will. However, now that he has reached the twilight years he has had afterthoughts about the matter. Elizabeth and her son are the only blood relatives of which Mr. MacGregor is aware. He has the choice of leaving his estate to them or to charities. He now prefers the former."

Jameson sighed. "All of this—the banishment and the disinheritance—occurred thirty-five years ago. In 1947, to be exact. After the marriage, Elizabeth and her husband packed up and left San Francisco. She sent her uncle a birth announcement after Harold was born. The envelope was postmarked Milwaukee, but she provided no return address. Not that MacGregor wanted one at the time. MacGregor has had no other communication from her since. Now—about your fees?"

I hedged, being prepared to negotiate. "They vary from case to case, the effort involved, and the difficulties encountered." I paused. "And the number of operatives I might have to assign to the case."

"Well, use as many as you need. I'll send you a two-thousand-dollar retainer to get you started. Is that sufficient?"

I had struck gold and I was tempted to say no. However, one must not get greedy and possibly kill the golden goose. Instead, I said, "I'll have my operatives get to work on this immediately."

Actually, I have no operatives. I don't even have a secretary. I can't afford one. I alone am Bradley Investigations, Inc.

"The minute you find them, get in touch with me," Jameson instructed. "I'll phone every other day or so to see how you're getting along. Send me an itemized list of your expenses."

I took down his phone number and office address before he hung up.

I sat back to think. Yes indeed, this could be a long, long search. Thirty-five years ago? A lot can happen in thirty-five years.

Where would I start? Well, obviously with the year 1947.

I drove to the main telephone exchange and got permission to consult the library of old directories.

Franklin and Elizabeth Sterling did not appear in the 1947 book. Probably they had arrived in the city too late to make the edition.

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I tried 1948.

Voila! There it was. Franklin Sterling. I copied the phone number and the address.

Americans are notoriously mobile, moving, on the average, once every four years. Just how mobile were the Sterlings? I skipped ahead five years.

Franklin Sterling was still in the book. Same phone number, same address.

I tried the year 1960. Yes, Franklin Sterling still there, same residence.

I leapfrogged to 1965. No Franklin Sterling. However, a now familiar address and telephone number caught my eye. This time they appeared after the name *Elizabeth* Sterling.

What had happened? Had there been a divorce and she had gained custody of the address and phone number? Or had Franklin died?

I tried the 1970 book. Elizabeth was still there.

Her name disappeared from the 1975 book. However, once again I found the familiar address and telephone number, this time by the name Harold Sterling.

What had happened to Elizabeth? Had she died or had Harold simply decided it was time to list the number under his own name?

I went on.

Harold's name was not in the 1979 edition. I rechecked the column of Sterlings for the familiar address and telephone number. They had disappeared completely.

I pondered. Harold had been about 32 or 33 years old in 1979. Very likely he had simply moved.

Well, that was the place for me to start—his last known address. I left the telephone building and drove on to the east side, to an older tree-lined neighborhood consisting principally of duplexes and single-family units.

I parked before one of the duplexes, went up the porch stairs, and pressed the buzzer at the door to the lower apartment.

A thin, grey-haired woman answered. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for a Mrs. Elizabeth Sterling. I understand she lived here for some time. Upstairs?"

She nodded. "But you won't find her there any more. She died seven years ago. Why do you want to find her?"

There was no point in my being secretive. "She has an uncle who is very anxious to find her. I'm a private detective assigned to the search."

I showed her my identification. Some people are impressed by private detectives. Most are not. She was at least curious. "I didn't know Elizabeth had any relatives. She never talked about any."

"She had a son, didn't she? Harold?"

"Yes. Harold. He grew up right here. A quiet kid, never caused any trouble. He was an only child, you know. The Sterlings came here back in 1947. They were the only people I had upstairs for more than thirty years. Elizabeth got to be my best friend. Her husband—that was Franklin—died around 1963 or '64. Run over by an automobile when he was crossing the street against the lights."

She lingered on the thought a moment and then continued. "Elizabeth died just seven years ago. I thought Harold might want to move then. He was alone and there are six big rooms upstairs, but he decided he'd rather stay where he grew up. He was an accountant too, just like his father—even worked for the same company. I thought of him almost like a son. Well, maybe a nephew."

"Where's Harold now? Still upstairs?"

Her eyes teared a bit. "No. He's dead too. Three years ago. Harold always walked to work—he never owned a car—and the company he worked for is only four blocks away. Well, one morning I didn't see or hear him go to work—coming down the stairs, you know? I wasn't really worried at the time because I thought it was just one of those mornings when I'd missed him somehow. But after five o'clock, one of the people Harold worked with at the company stopped by to find out what was wrong. The company had been phoning all day and they didn't get any answer.

"So we knew that something must be the matter. My husband found the spare keys for upstairs—we keep them for emergencies, you know—and we let ourselves in. And there was Harold. In bed. He must have died during the night.

"There was an autopsy because he died so young. Only thirty-one, and you could suspect foul play or suicide, though Harold never mentioned having ideas like that. But the coroner found that Harold had just died of a weak heart, like his mother."

She sighed. "The lawyer who had charge of Harold's will took care of things, like paying for the funeral out of Harold's estate. Harold left me \$10,000 in his will. He always thought of me as a second mother. Well, aunt, at least. And the rest of his estate went to charities.

"Harold also left me all the furniture upstairs. Harold's clothes didn't fit my husband, so I sold them at a garage sale and gave the

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proceeds to my church. But I packed his really personal things in a box and stored it in the attic. His butterfly collection, stamp collection, and so on. One box. Maybe you could take it off my hands? That uncle, being a blood relative, might be interested."

When I got back to my office I put the cardboard carton on top of my filing cabinet, then sat down at my desk. Well, that was it. I had finished off this case in less than two hours. Not bad time for a two-thousand-dollar retainer. But did it all end there?

Not if I could help it.

I reached for some blank paper. If Jameson wanted an itemized list of expenses, he'd get one. I'd have two operatives assigned to the job. Smith and Jones would do for now. They would trace Elizabeth Sterling to her 1947 Milwaukee address, of course, but they would find that she'd moved out of the state in 1955. Where to? How about Chicago? Nice and big and anonymous. It would take Smith and Jones about a week of extensive investigation to find her address in that city. But when they did, once again they would find that she'd moved on—this time to St. Louis.

I began making a list of the expenses Smith and Jones would incur. Hotels. The good ones. Mileage in a gas guzzler. Food. They were heavy eaters of fine food. At the end of the week, when I had the list finished and typed, I would send it off to Jameson.

I thought Jameson might phone the next day, Tuesday, for a report on my progress, but he didn't.

I waited for Wednesday's mail with some expectation, since it should contain my two-thousand-dollar retainer. However, Wednesday's mail arrived and it contained no check. Jameson didn't phone either.

Thursday passed. No check, no phone call.

I waited until Friday's mail—again, no check—and then picked up the phone and dialed Jameson in San Francisco.

A woman answered the phone.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Jameson," I said.

There was a pause at the other end of the line. "Mr. James Jameson?"

"The same."

Another pause. "Then I guess you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Mr. Jameson is dead. He was buried this morning."

I blinked. "When did he die?"

"Monday, sir. About noon, I think. I went into his office to have him sign some letters and there he was, just slumped over his desk. He was only sixty-three."

"Who am I talking to?"

"His secretary, sir. I'm just clearing up a few things and then I suppose the firm will assign me to somebody else."

"My name is Bradley. Of Bradley Investigations, Inc. Did Mr. Jameson speak to you about me?"

She took a moment to think. "No, sir."

I hung up.

Jameson had died about noon Monday, San Francisco time. He had phoned me at eleven, his time. Which meant that he had died within the hour after hiring me. Evidently he hadn't gotten around to writing out, much less mailing, the check.

What now? What could I salvage from this?

I'd have to get in touch with MacGregor personally. I'd tell him Jameson had meant to send me a two-thousand-dollar retainer for locating the whereabouts of Elizabeth Sterling and her son and I was working diligently on the case.

Would that be enough?

I had absolutely no proof that Jameson had hired me. Would MacGregor believe me, or would he think this was some kind of confidence game, taking advantage of Jameson's death? Would he decide that just to be on the safe side he should hire his own private detective to find his niece? There was that possibility.

I sighed. No, I'd have to play my whole hand at once and come right out with the fact that I'd already traced Elizabeth Sterling and her son, Harold. I would tell MacGregor that upon receipt of the two-thousand-dollar retainer Jameson had promised me, I'd send him the information.

Suppose MacGregor balked and put another agency on the job? After all, he would reason that if I could ferret out Elizabeth and her son another detective agency could do the same. And cheaper.

Difficulties, difficulties.

I glanced about my small office. One of these days I would have to dust it again. Maybe even wash the windows.

What had I expected when I first opened nearly a dozen years ago? Adventure? Excitement? What had I gotten? Divorce cases—and even that market was drying up now that our state grants no-fault divorces. Digging up dirt in child-custody disputes—there were few of these now that the definition of moral turpitude is so elastic.

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Missing persons—well, there were still a few of those. And an occasional opportunity to act as security guard at private functions.

Not once in all the years had anyone asked me to solve a murder.

What had all this brought me? A ten-year-old car that desperately needed an overhaul job. A utility apartment in a run-down building. A capacity for boredom.

Where would I be ten years from now? Right here, I supposed. And everything would still need dusting, the windows would still be grimy.

I shook myself out of my dark mood. Back to work. I would have to get copies of Elizabeth and Harold Sterling's death certificates. What other proof would I need?

My eyes went to the box containing what was left of Harold's world. Maybe there was something in it I could use. I put it on my desk and opened it.

I found the butterfly collection. It wasn't very extensive. From the dates under the pinned butterflies, I gathered that Harold had given up adding to it while still in his teens. The same with the stamp collection.

I came across photographs and snapshots taken over the years. Elizabeth Sterling with her husband and their son.

I found Harold's wallet. No money. No driver's license, but then he hadn't owned a car. And apparently he didn't believe in credit cards either. But he did have a social-security card and library card. Some wallet photos of his mother and father.

I rummaged further and came up with some packs of cancelled checks and old copies of income-tax forms. His high-school diploma. His birth certificate.

If he were alive today, he would have been two years younger than I.

I put the birth certificate, the social-security card, the library card, and the diploma in a row on my desk. I looked at my office again. I rubbed the back of my neck.

Suppose, just *suppose*, that Bradley Investigations, Inc., actually found Harold alive and well? Suppose that Bradley Investigations, Inc., immediately packed him off to San Francisco to present himself to his great-uncle—with proof of his identity. A birth certificate, a social-security card, a few selected photographs—but none of Harold beyond the age of, say, five. And perhaps a nice substantiating letter from Bradley Investigations, Inc., to the effect that this was indeed the long lost Harold Sterling.

Would it work?

I picked up the phone and reserved a one-way ticket to San Francisco.

That was six months ago.

Today Uncle MacGregor and I are the best of friends and constant companions. I am good for him and he is certainly good for me.

I sincerely wish him many more good years ahead. If there's one thing I'm not, it's greedy.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

MORE GRAVE TONES

by JAMES HOLDING

Here drop a tear and briefly tarry
 With Henry Makepeace Richard Carey,
 Who recently departed life
 Stomach-stabbed with a carving knife.
 When gendarmes pinned the heinous crime
 On a Japanese gardener from Anaheim,
 His sole defense, employed with tact,
 Was pointing out one simple fact.
 "Harry Carey not murder," he cried,
 "Hari-kari is suicide!"

Here's what's left
 Of Benny the Clamp.
 He tried to mug
 A karate champ.

© 1982 by James Holding.

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